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Atari Online News, Etc.
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A-ONE #1007 02/15/07

~ "Stormy" Valentine Day ~ People Are Talking! ~ Firefox 3 Beta 3!
~ Gamers Hit Record Book ~ Non-English Domains? ~ Best Buy Lawsuit!
~ HP "Spy" Case Settled! ~ eBay Cuts More Fees! ~ Spam SuperPowers!

~ Yahoo To Talk To AOL? ~ China Targets Internet ~ EA Does Hasbro!

-* Yahoo Rejects Microsoft Bid! *-
-* Illegal Downloaders Face Internet Ban *-
-* House Introduces New Net Neutrality Bill! *-

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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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Well, they say that bad things come on threes, and they - whoever 'they' are - were correct. Last week, I mentioned my introduction to becoming the fixin's for a vehicular sandwich. And Joe's "missing" column was due to a family emergency, as he'll mention in this week's column. And to top it all off, exactly one week to the day, my wife was involved in a car accident. Fortunately, she also came through it unscathed. This was another case of another idiot behind the wheel not paying attention, taking a left turn into oncoming traffic. The guy turned right into my wife's lane, and not leaving her time or room to stop in time.

I'm as much a supporter of the environment, and everything related, but I am very glad that we both drive (or used to drive) an SUV. Sure, they're not the most fuel-efficient vehicle on the roads these days, but as far as safety goes, I wouldn't trade them in for anything else! While mine is ending up in salvage heaven, my wife's truck only had a bashed-in front bumper. The other guy's car sustained more extensive damage. Sometimes bigger is better!

So, I have to admit that I haven't been too productive this past week, with all of the stuff necessary to complete for the insurance company. Forms and more forms, and reports to complete to get things finalized. It's been a pain, but something that is required to get things completed. So instead of ranting about the political scene, or relaying my "sincere" disappointment that "news" out of Hollywood has been slow-pickings this week, I just felt like venting about our auto mishaps! I know, this has nothing to do with Atari computers, or anything remotely related to our technological wonders of the day. But, that's why you folks pay us the big bucks!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. If you're a loyal reader of this column (and you two know who you are), then you know that I haven't had a column in the magazine for a couple of weeks.

Unfortunately, the volume of messages in the NewsGroup isn't what it used to be. More and more often it seems that it takes two or three weeks of messages to put together a decent column.

Don't worry, I'm not going to stop doing the column (yeah, I can see the look of immense relief on your face). But somewhere down the road I'm going to have to face the fact that there just aren't enough people, topics or messages to fill a column. Well, that's a worry for another week... hopefully far, far down the road.

On a personal note, lack of UseNet posts was only half the reason I didn't have a column for you last week. The other half was dealing with family issues.

While Dana was unwittingly playing tag with motor vehicles, I was trying to wring information out of my parents about my father's medical condition. Well, it seemed that he'd been having vision problems, and a rather crucial medical decision had to be made, but the eye surgeon told my father to talk to his family members before making a decision.

In a misguided attempt to show even-handedness and a total lack of favoritism, my parents decided that, instead of calling their offspring one at a time (there are 7 of us) to deliver the information, they'd gather us all together and tell us all at once.

The down-side of this is that, in order to ensure that we all attended "mirandopalluzza '08", they had to let one shoe drop by saying that it was relating to their meeting with the surgeon and that it was 'serious'.

Yeah, that's a hell of a shoe to let drop, but it's also a hell of a shoe to leave hanging in the air for almost a week.

Well, to make a long story... well, a little less long, it turns out that during a blood transfusion, a clot formed in the blood vessels that supply his right eye's optic nerve with oxygen. The result is that the optic nerve is severely damaged, and he can now see only shadows in that eye.

The other eye, unfortunately, has issues of its own. The degenerative nature of the condition of his left eye, stemming from scarring from a previous surgery, a clouded and thickened lens and a constricted cornea would have, if the other eye was in good shape, meant that it just didn't make sense to attempt such a complex, multi-faceted procedure to improve his vision. They would have preferred to wait until his vision deteriorated, as it inevitably will, since he would have still had good vision in the other eye.

Now, however, since that's his 'good' eye, it's necessary to maximize it. While the surgeon doesn't want to give a "percentage chance" of success (and I can't blame him... there are just too damned many variables involved), it's very possible that he may lose all vision in that eye, leaving him legally blind and unable to discern anything other than shadows.

Needless to say, he was extremely upset at being left with two

unacceptable choices: Either do nothing and become functionally blind within 18 months, or opt for the surgery and run a good chance of becoming blind during the surgery.

Well, being the oldest of his kids, as well as the most technically-minded, I asked to be involved in the upcoming meeting with the surgeon. My father, after hemming and hawing, agreed.

Well, it’s still a scary proposition, but I’m more confident now than I was before the meeting. I’ve known of this surgeon for almost a decade now, and his reputation is quite good, but until I had met him, I wasn’t anywhere near optimistic. Now at least, I believe there’s a better chance for a good outcome than a bad one.

I was also able to explain to my parents, after listening to the surgeon, about what certain parts of the procedure were, why they were necessary, and what the pro’s and con’s were.

All in all, the whole family is cautiously optimistic now. The surgery is scheduled for the end of March... I’ll keep you updated.

Well, let’s get on with the reason for this column in the first place... the news, hints, tips and info available from the UseNet.

From the comp.sys.atari.st NewsGroup

’Mark’ asks:

"I was wondering where to buy an eiffel these days. I tried fujiman.no-ip.com because I thought Rory who runs that site was selling them but it seems down. I need to get one for coldfire development."

Edward Baiz tells Mark:

"Rory would be the man. I bought mine from him on Ebay late last year. Nice little device. I hope to use it when I get my CT63."

’Phantomm’ jumps in and asks:

"Isn’t the Eiffel, something like the KeyBoard Gizmo, which allows you to connect a PC style keyboard, mouse, along with joystick?

I have one of these, (KeyBoard Gizmo), not used yet. Neat piece of hardware, especially because it requires no drivers to use."

Edward replies:

"Yes, that is correct. With the Eiffel you can connect a PS2 type keyboard and mouse to the Falcon. Nice device...."

Edward Baiz now makes a comment about the CT63 that he’s expecting to receive:

"... When I finally get the CT63 and install the Falcon MB into my old tower, I will have a system even faster than the my Hades and with better sound."

Jean-Francois Lemaire chimes in:

"But also with worse graphics, unfortunately."

Edward Baiz adds:

"Possibly. I have Screenblaster II and it does a fair job of giving me a 800x600 environment. I am hoping with the 512meg of Ram in the CT63, SBII will give 1024x768 setup. But all that will be moot when the PCI upgrade for the CT63 comes out. Didier M. has a driver for a video card that is MUCH better than the one I had in my Hades."

Jean-Francois replies:

"I'm afraid more ram won't change anything. I've got my CT63 now and though the processing power is amazingly faster than that of a stock Falcon, there is not much difference regarding screen display.

[As far as the PCI card is concerned,] I would say that the difference should be in the same order of magnitude than between the stock Falcon and the CT63. Imagine that."

Edward replies:

"As far as the RAM, I mean that Screenblaster II will allow me to use a 1024x768 environment with the extra RAM installed. Now I can only go as high as 800x600."

'Sam F.' asks about a problem he's having with HD Driver:

"It's probably me but anyways here goes. I've been able to partition my hdd, and HDDriver sees all the partitions except...when I tell it to copy Hddriver.prg. The only partitions it brings up to select from are d,e, and f. I've read all through the manual, and I just can't figure out what's happening? Also, how do I adapt a newer floppy drive to the Falcon?"

Uwe Seimet, author of HD Driver, tells Sam:

"Please check whether the size of your C: partition is legal for your version of TOS. For TOS 1.0x 256 MB is the upper limit, for TOS 2.0x/3.0x it's 512 MB and for TOS 4.0x it's 1 GB."

Sam replies to Uwe:

"Ah! That may be the problem...I was partitioning a 4gig hdd into 4 equal partitions...ending up with 1031.7 per partition."

Well folks, that's it for this time around. Tune in again next week,

same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Gamers Back In Record Book!
EA Announces Hasbro Games!
China Targets Internet!
And more!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!

EA Announces First Wave of Hasbro Video Games

Electronic Arts Inc on Monday announced upcoming games based on popular Hasbro Inc properties such as "Monopoly" and "Littlest Pet Shop," an important part of its push to make video games for a broader audience.

As part of a licensing deal struck in August, EA will bring classic family games to a range of game systems and devices, said Chip Lange, vice president of the company's Hasbro game studio.

"This is the first wave of a very long deal," Lange said. "All these games are being designed with the thought of bringing people together, whether physically or through technology."

The first wave of games will hit mobile phones this spring and will include versions of "Monopoly," "Trivial Pursuit," "Risk" and "Yahtzee."

Games based on the girl-oriented "Littlest Pet Shop" and boy-focused "Nerf N-Strike" will come out for Nintendo Co Ltd's Wii console and DS handheld.

EA is also working on versions of "Monopoly," "Scrabble" and other titles for several consoles that will be announced later this year. Lange did not give details, but other major consoles include Sony Corp's PlayStation 2 and PlayStation 3 machines and Microsoft Corp's Xbox 360.

The Hasbro deal is important to EA because the company is trying to capitalize on a shift towards so-called casual games triggered by the Wii's runaway success.

Casual games are loosely defined as those that can easily be learned and played. They appeal more to groups outside the traditional video game

audience of young men.

For its part, Hasbro is eyeing the partnership as a way to extend its key franchises into the digital realm as video games increasingly encroach on traditional forms of entertainment such as movies and toys.

Lange said the games would be more than just digital copies of their real-world counterparts, designed with the capabilities and usage patterns of each device in mind.

For instance, mobile users will be able to play "Monopoly" in quick chunks only a few minutes long. On a game console, players will be able to breeze through the game in 30 minutes, rather than the hours needed to finish the board game.

"We’re not just creating digital ports of these products," Lange said. "We’re taking these brands and creating great games based on them."

Gamers Zap Their Way Into New Record Book

If you think you spend too much time stuck in front of a computer screen, spare a thought for bleary eyed gamer Eric Furrer.

The Canadian holds the world record for the longest game of Space Invaders after zapping aliens for 38 hours and 30 minutes during a marathon session in 1980.

Furrer, who was 12 at the time, has found a place alongside thousands of trivial superlatives in the first Guinness World Records book dedicated solely to computer games.

From the basic Atari consoles of the 1970s to the latest handheld devices from Nintendo and Sony, the compendium sheds light on an industry that has transfixed generations of teenagers.

Its editor Keith Pullin said: "The games industry is the fastest growing entertainment sector in the world."

Here are some of the entries:

* In 1982, American Scott Safran achieved the highest score on the classic game Asteroids, notching up 41,336,440 points.

* Nintendo’s "Super Mario Bros." is the best-selling console game in history. It has sold more than 40 million copies.

* The biggest online role-playing game is "World of Warcraft," with about 10 million subscribers. It also boasts the biggest virtual beer festival, Brewfest.

* The longest title for a strategy game is the less than snappy "The Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-Earth II - The Rise of the Witch-King."

* After Space Invaders, PAC-Man is the second most popular arcade game of all time.

The book says it was originally called Puck-Man because the main character is disc-shaped. The name was changed to stop vandals in arcades from turning the first word into an expletive.

- Guinness World Records Gamer’s Edition 2008 is published this month.

"The Club," A Game That Shoots for Style

Last year’s bumper crop of shooter video games, such as "BioShock," "Halo 3" and "Call of Duty 4," were notable for coupling bone-jarring realism with finely crafted epic stories. "The Club," coming out next week from Sega, promises something a little different.

There’s no saving humanity, no detailed world to explore, no need to bone up on military strategy or tactics.

Instead, "The Club" boils down simply to this: how many people can you shoot, and how fast can you do it?

Sure, the game is wrapped in a pulpy story casting you as one of eight characters, such as an extreme-sports thrill-seeker or a burly Russian hunter, drawn into an underground blood sport for the amusement of rich fans.

That’s an excuse, if one was needed, for blasting your way through a factory or fending off waves of attackers as you try to stay alive for a set period of time.

"If you’re comparing to ’Gears of War’, ’Halo’, ’Call of Duty’, they are more realistic based, while we wanted something urban, low-down, gritty," said Omar Woodley, a producer on "The Club" at publisher Sega of America.

The twist in "The Club" is that you rack up points for each kill, and by stringing kills close together, you earn bonuses that multiply your points. Extra points are awarded for stylish moves like head shots, or breaking through a door and taking out opponents on the other side.

"The Club" harkens back to arcade days when video games were about high scores and achievement was rewarded with your name flashing above those of your friends and rivals.

The game was developed by UK-based Bizarre Creations, which lifted the core game element from its well-regarded "Project Gotham Racing" driving series that rewards stylish moves like power slides, drafting and catching air.

"They have their racing heritage to look out for and they wanted to bring elements from the ’PGR’ series to something new," Woodley said. "It’s really targeting the action arcade-style gamer. Anybody that plays a shooter will enjoy it and anyone who plays a racer will enjoy it. But it boils down to how high a score you can get and how you can raise that."

Bizzare, which was acquired by publisher Activision last September, wasn’t the first to apply racing characteristics to a shooting game.

Criterion Games, a British developer owned by Electronic Arts, did

something similar with 2005’s "Black," which reveled in gun-enabled destruction the same way its popular "Burnout" racing series did with spectacular car crashes.

"Black" didn’t revolutionize the genre but got generally positive reviews, a precedent that looks to be repeated for "The Club," which has scored 78 from review-aggregation site Metacritic.org.

That’s not in the same league as recent acclaimed shooters, but reviewers said the fast-paced action and wide selection of solo and multiplayer challenges made up for the shallow story.

"It’s a one-trick pony, true. Yet does that even matter when the trick is this damn good? Of course it doesn’t. Just buckle up, enjoy the ride and hang on for your life," the UK edition of "Official Xbox Magazine" said.

"The Club" goes on sale February 19 for Microsoft Xbox 360, Sony’s PlayStation 3, and Windows-based personal computers. It is rated "M" in the United States, meaning it is suitable for players aged 17 and over.

China Targets Internet In Crime Sweep

Seeking to ferret out online games considered overly violent or unhealthy, China has targeted illegal Web sites, computer markets and Internet cafes as part of a campaign to rein in juvenile crime.

The crackdown, christened "Operation For Tomorrow," is also aimed at Web sites offering unregistered playing platforms or services for gamers that can be downloaded, the official Xinhua News Agency said Tuesday.

The plan will "use the law to attack, investigate and prosecute ... to cleanse the environment in which young people are raised and prevent and reduce juvenile crime and illegal activity," the report said.

China strictly monitors the Internet for anti-government speech and uncensored news reports, but the report made no mention of such content.

Xinhua said the plan especially targets school dropouts, runaways, children of inmates, and children left behind by parents who have migrated for work.

Unlicensed Internet cafes, known as "black Web bars," will be closed down and supervision will be tightened over legal cafes, the report said.

Internet cafes have been repeatedly targeted for breeding juvenile crime and promoting truancy, despite widely ignored rules barring anyone under 18 from admission. Located in towns and small cities throughout China, internet cafes mainly offer online games that are popular among young people. Authorities have blamed the cafes for Internet addiction and for encouraging juvenile crime as a way to earn money to play online games.

Online pornography will also be attacked under the crackdown, the report said.

Government offices were closed for the Lunar New Year holiday Tuesday, and spokesmen were unavailable for comment.

The report carried the authority of an official announcement because it was posted on the Web site of the Central Committee for Comprehensive Management of Public Security. Xinhua is state-owned and often serves the function of proclaiming official policies.

The committee is a high level coordination and advisory body for public security departments under the central cabinet and Communist Party Central Committee.

Enforcers will act under guidelines adopted last year by 14 government departments, including the Culture Ministry, State Administration for Industry and Commerce, Public Security Ministry, and Information Industry Ministry, the report said.

Like most such measures, the crackdown seeks to increase government supervision and control over services for vulnerable groups.

While promoting government shelters and other official services, it will step-up supervision over domestic and foreign charity groups and other non-governmental organizations, the report said.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Yahoo Rejects Microsoft Bid

Yahoo Inc on Monday rejected Microsoft Corp's unsolicited $41.5 billion takeover offer as too low, forcing the software maker to either sweeten its bid or adopt a hostile approach to clinch a deal.

Analysts say Microsoft will probably raise its bid, originally valued at $31 a share, to at least $35, but could be persuaded to go as high as $40. Yahoo's statement did not suggest what price its board was seeking.

"The proposal is not in the best interests of Yahoo! and our stockholders," Chief Executive Jerry Yang wrote in an e-mail to employees on Monday. "We believe Microsoft's proposal substantially undervalues Yahoo!"

Yahoo said the offer did not properly assess its global brand, its audience of some 500 million users worldwide and investments in its online advertising platform.

The offer also does not take into account growth prospects or substantial holdings, which include a stake in Chinese e-commerce firm Alibaba.com, the company said. Yahoo said its board was evaluating all its strategic options.

Microsoft now must decide whether to sweeten its offer, launch a proxy fight or simply withdraw. A Microsoft spokesman declined to comment.

"The most likely outcome is they negotiate a higher price," said William Blair & Co analyst Troy Mastin. "It seems Microsoft has expressed a willingness" to go to $35 or $36 a share.

A more hostile alternative could be to propose a tender offer to buy shares directly from Yahoo shareholders, although Yahoo could use a "poison pill" defense to dilute the stock holdings purchased in the market by an unwanted aggressor.

Microsoft could also seek to replace Yahoo’s board with directors more favorable to its point of view. Yahoo has set a March 14 deadline for shareholders to nominate directors.

RBC Capital reduced its rating on Microsoft to "sector perform" from "outperform" and cut its target price to $31 from $40, saying the company would be distracted with the acquisition and extended integration with Yahoo if successful.

A merger of Microsoft and Yahoo would be the largest ever of two computer technology companies and would create a formidable rival to Web search leader Google Inc.

Microsoft announced the half-stock, half-cash offer on February 1. At the time, the bid represented a 62 percent premium to Yahoo’s stock price. The offer was originally worth $44.6 billion, but is now worth $41.48 billion, or about $28.83 per share, following the decline in Microsoft’s stock price.

Yahoo CEO and co-founder Yang has taken steps to try to keep the company independent, including considering an alternate tie-up in which Google would handle its search operations.

The company may also make a new approach to Time Warner Inc’s AOL Internet division, the Times of London said on Monday. Time Warner declined comment on the report.

Yahoo shareholders may not have much patience for a drawn-out battle, particularly as the company continues to lose market share to Google. Yahoo last month disappointed Wall Street with its 2008 revenue forecasts, promising to cut jobs and shore up its Web advertising with new investment.

In the letter to employees, Yang said Yahoo was well positioned to capture a larger share of a global online advertising market that is expected to grow to $75 billion in 2010 from $45 billion in 2007.

The letter, written entirely in lower-case letters to reflect the quirky corporate culture of the Web pioneer, said the company was seeking to drive a 15 percent per year increase in visits to Yahoo.com and other central sites.

Yahoo is generating substantial operating cash flow, which gives it financial flexibility to pursue its plans, Yang said, targeting double-digit growth in percentage terms in 2009.

The company is seeking to keep its more than 14,000 employees placated as it girds for what is shaping up to be a potentially drawn-out, hostile takeover battle with Microsoft.

Sanford C. Bernstein’s top Internet, media and technology analysts said in a research note that there was an increasing possibility that "the Yahoo board is digging in for a fight ... and the situation will turn ugly."

Goldman, Sachs & Co, Lehman Brothers and Moelis & Co are working as financial advisors to Yahoo; Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom is Yahoo’s legal advisor. Munger Tolles & Olson is acting as counsel to Yahoo’s outside directors.

Yahoo Seeks To Restart Merger Talks With AOL

Yahoo is seeking to restart merger talks with AOL as a means of defending itself against an unsolicited bid approach from Microsoft, the Times newspaper said on Monday.

The paper, without citing sources, said Yahoo was also considering tie-ups with groups such as Google and Disney.

It said Yahoo and AOL had previously tried to join forces, but were unable to agree on the price of a deal.

None of the parties mentioned could immediately be reached for comment.

Major Yahoo Investor Urges Microsoft To Raise Offer

Yahoo Inc’s second-biggest investor urged Microsoft Corp to raise its $42 billion bid for the Web pioneer and warned Yahoo it has few options left, raising the pressure on them to seal a deal.

In a quarterly letter to investors released on Tuesday, Bill Miller, the star stock-picker at U.S. asset manager Legg Mason Inc, estimated fair value for Yahoo to be near $40 per share, versus Microsoft’s original offer of $31 per share.

Microsoft "will need to enhance its offer if it wants to complete a deal," Miller wrote in a February 10 letter, one day before Yahoo formally rejected Microsoft’s plan for the company.

"It will be hard for (Yahoo) to come up with alternatives that deliver more value than (Microsoft) will ultimately be willing to pay," Miller wrote. "We think this deal is a strategic imperative for (Microsoft) and that (Yahoo) is in a tough spot if it wishes to remain independent."

Miller’s comments came as major institutional Yahoo shareholders have been working behind the scenes to get the parties to strike a deal, analysts say. Around 53 of the top 100 big funds in Yahoo hold shares in both companies, according to the most recent shareholder data available from September.

Institutional shareholders hold about 75 percent of Yahoo’s stock, according to Reuters data, versus 10 percent for company insiders, including co-founders David Filo and Jerry Yang.

Legg Mason Capital Management, the unit of Legg Mason run by Miller, owns more than 80 million Yahoo shares, or 6 percent of the company, trailing only Capital Research & Management’s 11 percent holding.

Yahoo on Monday turned down Microsoft’s bid, now valued at $41.7 billion, saying it did not properly assess the value of Yahoo’s vast audience, online advertising investments, cash generation and growth prospects of its overseas holdings.

Microsoft responded the same day by saying its offer was "full and fair," but stopped short of saying it would not raise its price.

Redmond, Washington-based Microsoft also said it reserved the right "to pursue all necessary steps" without specifying if it plans to take its bid straight to Yahoo shareholders.

Analysts expect Microsoft to raise its bid to at least $35 a share, but some believe it could be persuaded to go as high as $40.

RBC Capital analyst Jordan Rohan said major funds are likely to grow impatient with Yahoo to get a deal done if Microsoft raises its bid a few dollars to the mid-$30s-a-share level and sweetens the cash portion of its existing offer.

"The more vocal funds are almost threatening Yahoo that they better take the next offer," Rohan said.

Yahoo shares are now trading at a 2 percent premium to Microsoft’s cash-and-stock deal, indicating investors expect Microsoft to raise its bid.

Legg Mason’s Miller noted Yahoo shares had been trading at a four-year low prior to Microsoft’s offer and the stock was trading above Microsoft’s bid price for all of 2004.

Yahoo shares fell 30 cents, or 1 percent, to $29.57 on the Nasdaq on Tuesday. Microsoft shares rose 13 cents to $28.34.

Yahoo continues to lose Web search market share to Google Inc. Last month, it disappointed Wall Street with its 2008 revenue outlook as it promised to cut jobs and invest more in online advertising work.

According to employees at the Sunnyvale, California-based company, Yahoo began carrying out those lay-offs of up to 1,000 employees on Tuesday. A Yahoo spokeswoman declined to comment.

Several Wall Street analysts said the chances of alternate bidders for Yahoo emerging have grown remote because any deal would have to be structured in such a way that it can compete with a roughly 60 percent premium implied by Microsoft’s bid.

Citigroup issued a research note on Tuesday saying the likelihood that Microsoft will offer a higher bid to clinch a deal with Yahoo is rising. It now puts the probability that this will occur at 55 percent.

The second-most-probable scenario with a 30 percent chance, according to Citigroup, is that Yahoo remains independent and outsources its search to Google.

Speculation has swirled in recent days that Yahoo is considering

potential deals that could involve pairing off with either Time Warner Inc’s AOL or News Corp’s MySpace, if their media companies were prepared to spin these businesses off.

Media investor blog Silicon Alley Reporter quoted unnamed sources on Tuesday saying that News Corp and Yahoo are still discussing a possible transaction, but provided no details.

But when News Corp Chairman Rupert Murdoch was asked last week by a reporter whether he was considering a Yahoo deal, he replied: "I think that day has passed, but you never know."

Mozilla Releases Firefox 3 Beta 3

Mozilla has released Firefox 3 Beta 3, the latest test version of the open source Internet browser.

Firefox 3 Beta 3, released Tuesday, is intended for testers and developers; casual Internet users are advised not to download it. Known issues, including lack of compatibility with Windows Live Mail and systems freezes in Google Docs, make this release unsuitable for general use.

Beta 3 includes more than 1,300 fixes from the previous version. In addition to better performance and stability, Beta 3 includes improved security, ease of use, and personalization.

In terms of both form and function, the updated browser is now more elegantly integrated with Linux, Mac OS X, and Windows Vista.

Among the features that work better in the new version are one-click site info, which lets users click on the favicon in the Firefox location bar to find out more about a Web site, and malware protection, which warns users when they attempt to visit sites known to install malware.

In November, Jeff Jones, security strategy director in Microsoft’s Trustworthy Computing group, posted a report on the vulnerabilities in Microsoft Internet Explorer and Mozilla Firefox over three years. He found that Internet Explorer had fewer vulnerabilities than Firefox.

"While the data trends show that both Internet Explorer and Firefox security quality is improved in the latest version, it also demonstrates that, contrary to popular belief, Internet Explorer has experienced fewer vulnerabilities than Firefox," said Jones.

Mike Schroepfer, Mozilla’s VP of engineering, doesn’t consider Jones’ numbers trustworthy. In a blog post, he dismissed the vulnerability statistics as impossible to verify because Microsoft’s security process isn’t open to public scrutiny.

In its 2007 security report, Secunia found that Mozilla tended to post Firefox patches more quickly than Microsoft posted Internet Explorer patches.

Lawmakers Introduce New Net Neutrality Bill

Two lawmakers have introduced legislation that would prohibit broadband providers from blocking or impairing Web content from competitors.

Reps. Ed Markey, a Massachusetts Democrat, and Chip Pickering, a Mississippi Republican, introduced the Internet Freedom Preservation Act Wednesday. The bill says it is U.S. policy to "guard against unreasonable discriminatory favoritism for, or degredation of, content by network operators based upon its source, ownership, or destination on the Internet."

The bill would also require the U.S. Federal Communications Commission to open a proceeding on broadband services and consumer rights. The FCC would be required to investigate whether broadband providers have adhered to its August 2005 policy that providers should refrain from blocking or interfering with Web content.

"The open architecture nature of the Internet ... has ensured the Internet's place as the greatest level playing field ever created," Markey said as he introduced the bill. "The goal of this bipartisan legislation is to assure consumers, content providers, and high-tech innovators that the historic, open architecture nature of the Internet will be preserved and fostered. [The bill] is designed to assess and promote Internet freedom for consumers and content providers."

A group of advocacy groups, as well as Google and Amazon.com, praised the bill, saying it is needed as recent news report have suggested Comcast is slowing its customer access to high-bandwidth applications such as BitTorrent. Comcast on Tuesday filed a document with the FCC defending its practice of engaging in "network management."

Petitions by advocacy group Free Press and online video distributor Vuze to have the FCC prohibit Comcast's traffic throttling "raise important issues about the ability of broadband network operators to engage in reasonable network management to ensure that their customers can enjoy a positive broadband experience," Comcast said in its FCC filing. "Network management is best left to the sound, good-faith judgment of the engineers and proprietors who run and own the networks and who are best able to remedy customer service issues promptly, rather than to regulation."

The FCC has no prohibitions against Comcast's behavior, the company argued. "Free Press mistakenly relies on the [2005 FCC] Internet Policy Statement as creating rules the commission can enforce," Comcast said.

But representatives of the Open Internet Coalition, including Free Press and Public Knowledge, praised the new Markey legislation, saying it would remove doubt about U.S. policy on blocking or slowing Web content.

In the last six months, Comcast and other broadband and mobile-phone providers have repeatedly tried to block content on their networks, said Markham Erickson, the Open Internet Coalition's executive director. Erickson called Comcast's Tuesday FCC filing "remarkable."

"It appears to declare war on Internet users, policy makers, and even the FCC," he said. "It essentially says that the FCC has no legal ability to protect consumers from discriminatory behavior."

The Comcast filing called Free Press' complaints about its network

management "inflammatory hyperbole." Asked about Erickson's comments on the filing, Comcast spokeswoman Sean Fitzmaurice denied that the company was saying the FCC had no authority to regulate net neutrality.

The Markey bill is not as specific as past net neutrality bills that failed in a Republican-controlled Congress in 2006, but it would set a standard in federal law, said Gigi Sohn, president of Public Knowledge. "It's the right bill at the right time," she said.

Without prohibitions against blocking or slowing Web content, broadband providers could sign deals with some content providers and shut out new Internet-based companies, added Richard Whitt, Google's Washington telecom and media counsel.

"Keeping the on-ramps to the Web free of undue discrimination is not about Google, it's about the next Google," Whitt said.

Comcast declined to comment on the Markey bill. But Hands Off the Internet, an advocacy group with members including broadband providers AT&T and Qwest, said it could support an FCC study of net neutrality.

"There's no question that a reasoned examination of the facts will demonstrate the folly of net neutrality," the group said in a statement, "However, we are concerned that an effort to seek public input is intended to be a stalking horse for federal Internet regulation. The continued push by special interests to regulate Internet neutrality undercuts the best hope Net users have for faster, more affordable broadband."

E-Mail Carries Love And Viruses For Valentine's Day

Just in time for Valentine's Day, Google on Tuesday released the results of a survey showing that young people are embracing e-mail to send love letters. Coincidentally, the FBI warned on Tuesday that cybercriminals are embracing e-mail to send fake love letters.

"The survey affirmed that e-mail is an increasingly important part of our most intimate and personal interactions, and that younger people are leading the charge: they are more likely to use e-mail for everything from sending love letters to ending relationships," said Google group product marketing manager Jen Grant in a blog post.

But the FBI advises caution. "If you unexpectedly receive a Valentine's Day e-card, be careful," the agency said. "It may not be from a secret admirer, but instead might contain the Storm Worm virus."

Security software vendor Trend Micro issued a similar warning on Monday. "As we had already forecast last month, Storm is already sending their Valentine greetings this week," said security researcher David Sancho in a blog post. "The owners of this powerful botnet are doing as much as possible to [sustain the number of compromised machines at their disposal]. This includes spamming people and making them click on malicious links. This time around, the messages are of love."

More and more of this virus-laden e-mail love is coming from Russia. According to Sophos, Russia has overtaken China to become the second largest sender of spam, behind the United States.

"Responsible for a third of all unwanted e-mail, USA and Russia can be viewed as the two dirty men of the spam generation, polluting e-mail traffic with unwanted and potentially malicious messages," said Carole Theriault, senior security consultant at Sophos, in a statement.

Non-English Domains Still Unsettled

Weeklong discussions in India about the creation of online domain names entirely in languages other than English led to greater understanding but no major decisions, the chief executive of the Internet's key oversight agency said Friday.

At issue is a proposed "fast-track" mechanism for specific countries to get non-English suffixes - the ".com" part of Internet addresses. For example, many Internet users in China would like to see a Chinese-character equivalent of the ".cn" suffix.

Under one scenario, each country would be entitled to one non-English suffix while work continues on resolving broader challenges, such as how to make sure a domain in one language isn't inadvertently offensive in another.

Addresses partly in foreign languages are sometimes possible today, but the suffix for now is limited to 37 characters: a-z, 0-9 and the hyphen.

Supporters say demand for non-English names - to expand Internet usage to those who cannot speak English or at least type English characters - is so great they cannot afford to wait the few years it might take to settle those questions.

Critics of giving those countries "fast-track" status worry that they would get an unfair advantage over those that must wait until the full guidelines are developed.

"At the beginning of the week, various groups mapped out their extreme positions," said Paul Twomey, chief executive of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, the U.S. group tasked with overseeing domain name issues. "By the end of the week, it became a more reasonable conversation."

Twomey said a working group may make recommendations by ICANN's next major meeting in Paris in June. ICANN's board took no action on new domains Friday as the meetings wrapped up in New Delhi.

Twomey said he does not expect ICANN to start accepting bids for specific names until the end of this year at the earliest.

ICANN also has been working on procedures for creating new domain names in English to join the more than 250 already in existence. Those rules are still being formulated.

The board took no action on a proposed ".post" for postal services, the only application still pending from 2004.

HP and Journalists Settle Spy Claims

Hewlett-Packard Co settled claims on Wednesday with four reporters at the heart of a scandal involving claims that the world's biggest PC maker engaged in corporate espionage to plug a boardroom leak.

Hewlett-Packard and Terry Gross, the attorney representing the journalists, said the company would donate money to several charities chosen by the journalists as part of the terms of the settlement. They did not say how much.

"The matter has been resolved to the mutual satisfaction of the parties, and we are pleased to put this matter behind us," said Hewlett-Packard spokesman Emma McCulloch.

She said the company was pleased the money would go to charities.

The scandal, which came to light in late 2006, focused on allegations that Hewlett-Packard hired investigators who impersonated reporters, board members and employees to obtain private phone records to find the source of leaks to the media in 2005 and 2006.

The two sides have been holding settlement discussions since December 2006, Gross said.

"It was hard fought to get to a resolution," Gross told Reuters.

"I would have expected that they would have taken a tone a long time ago that was basically 'We did wrong. We should make up for it,"' he said.

Woman Hits Best Buy With $54M Suit for Losing Laptop

A Washington, D.C., woman has filed a lawsuit seeking $54 million in damages from Best Buy after the electronics retailer lost her laptop computer last year.

The lawsuit was filed in D.C. superior court last November but was publicized in media outlets this week. According to plaintiff Raelyn Campbell, Geek Squad technicians at Best Buy's Tenleytown, D.C., store lost the computer sometime around July 2007, then the company misled her about its whereabouts for a few weeks before finally admitting on Aug. 9 that it had been lost.

Best Buy offered Campbell $1,110 and a $500 gift card in compensation, something she calls a "lowball" offer on a blog she has devoted to the issue.

According to her, the point of the lawsuit is to publicly embarrass Best Buy into changing its privacy policy in such cases.

"To me, the big issue is not the low-balling and bullying tactics, but Best Buy's systematic disregard for its customers' personal information and potential exposure to identity theft," she wrote in her blog. "I am hoping the attention that the lawsuit and this website generate might motivate Best Buy and other consumer electronics stores entrusted with products that contain consumers' personal information to adopt thorough

procedures and policies to safeguard customers' property and personal information against theft."

Best Buy can't say much about the issue because it's still before the court, but the company is working to find out what went wrong, according to company spokeswoman Nissa French.

"We're obviously embarrassed and disappointed that we were unable to resolve this customer's issue. We've tried to resolve this dispute and feel badly that it escalated to a lawsuit," she said in an e-mail.

Campbell could not be reached for comment.

On her blog, she admitted that the $54 million in damages she was seeking was an "absurd amount," but said that she chose such a large sum in order to draw attention to the problem.

Laptop thefts are frequently the source of widely publicized data breaches. On Wednesday, Lifeblood, a Memphis, Tennessee, blood collection agency, said it was notifying 320,000 blood donors after two of its laptops went missing. The computers contained personal information including Social Security numbers.

The issue of computer retailers and repair shops losing consumer laptops has not gained much attention, but Campbell believes these companies have a "legal and moral obligation" to safeguard confidential information on computers that are entrusted to them.

Although Campbell's situation is an unusual one, it makes sense for Best Buy to take extra steps to protect its customers' privacy by offering ID theft protection services, said Paul Stephens, director of policy and advocacy with Privacy Rights Clearinghouse, a privacy advocacy group that tracks data breaches. "We're talking about a loss of something that's been entrusted to them," he said. "As a bare minimum, they should be doing that."

British Illegal Downloaders Face Internet Ban

Internet users in Britain who illegally download films and music face being banned from going online, according to leaked government proposals published in The Times on Tuesday.

According to the plans, the government "will move to legislate to require internet service providers to take action on illegal file sharing" which record companies and film companies say is costing them billions of dollars (euros) in lost revenue.

The proposals were included in a Green Paper - the first step to changing a law in Britain - on the creative industries that is due to be published next week.

The Times said that the plans would involve a "three-strikes" regime - users would first receive an e-mailed warning if they were suspected of illegally downloading films or music.

They would then receive a suspension from their Internet service upon their second offence, and face a termination of their Internet contract

if they were caught on a third occasion.

Answering Anger, eBay Cuts More Fees

EBay Inc. bowed to pressure Monday from some of its high-volume sellers, saying it will further cut listing fees for books, music, movies and video games sold through the online auction site.

Monday’s move amends a fee structure announced last month and could mean savings for merchants who sell those goods in high volume. Those sellers had expected to lose money from the new plan, slated to take effect Feb. 20. Some had threatened to stop selling on eBay.

The company said last month it plans to cut the fees for listing an item but raise eBay’s commissions on items that sell. Merchants quickly complained the cuts were not enough to balance the hike in commissions.

Monday’s amendment further cuts - by as much as half - the listing fees for items in the "media" category selling for less than $25.

The two rounds of changes come as eBay struggles with flattening growth in listings and the number of active users - and with a gradual loss of market share to Amazon.com, which does not charge listing fees.

Online message boards have been abuzz with threats of a site-wide sellers strike since the new fee structure was announced.

People who sell media items complained the changes would hit them especially hard because they post many more listings than other sellers - some offering more than 40,000 items on eBay each month.

Lorrie Norrington, president of eBay’s Global Marketplace Operations, which includes the company’s online shopping sites, announced the new changes Monday.

"We heard your comments about the need for media and category-specific pricing," Norrington said in a statement posted online.

Steve Grossberg - a top seller of video games and president of the Internet Merchants Association, which lobbied the company to take another look at the new fee plan - said Monday’s announcement will benefit thousands of media sellers like him. Now most sellers in the category, if not all, will see their fees go down, he said.

He says the media category accounts for 10 percent of core listings.

Company spokesman Usher Lieberman said the "change in the media category will not have a material impact" on company finances.

Media sellers have long asked for a fee structure specific to their category because of their low profit margins and average selling price and high listing volume, said Cantor Fitzgerald analyst Derek Brown.

"Part of the concern these sellers had was that their fees were likely going to be going up as a result of all these changes, and that would have discouraged their listings and sales," Brown said.

"I don’t believe it was their (eBay’s) intent to discourage listings from happening in the first place, but that may have been an unintended consequence, particularly in the media category," Brown said.

Russia Becomes ’Spam Superpower’

Russia has become a a "superpower" of spam e-mail, becoming the second most prolific country after the United States in producing junk emails, a computer security firm said Monday.

"The country has stormed into second place, accounting for 8.3 percent of the world’s spam, or one in 12 junk mails seen in inboxes," according to security firm Sophos in its quarterly update on spam email.

Between October and December 2007, the United States remained the spam leader, accounting for 21 percent of these emails, which contained unsolicited marketing pitches and sometimes viruses or other malicious software.

But on a regional basis, Asia ranked first with 32 percent of all spam, followed by Europe at 27 percent, with North America in third place, accounting for 26.5 percent of junk email.

The "dirty dozen" spam-relaying countries were the United States, Russia, China (4.2 percent), Brazil (4.0 percent), South Korea (3.9 percent), Turkey (3.8 percent), Italy (3.5 percent), Poland (3.4 percent), Germany (3.2 percent), Spain (3.1 percent), Mexico (3.1 percent) and Britain (2.5 percent).

"Countries that continually remain among the top spam-relaying countries need to ensure that they are doing more to proper defend computer systems," said Mike Haro, senior security analyst at Sophos.

"If they continue to sit back as compromised computers spread malicious emails and malware, then hackers will continue to look at these systems as easy targets in their efforts to turn them into botnets," which can be controlled by hackers.

In one of the latest efforts to bypass spam filters, Sophos said cybercriminals sent out their messages with supposed music files from stars such as Elvis Presley, Fergie and Carrie Underwood attached to the messages.

The files actually contained a monotone voice encouraging people to buy shares in a little-known company.

"This spam campaign is a perfect example of how cybercriminals will change their approach and tactics in order to trick users into making bad choices," said Haro.

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